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'Th'angelic train': Evangelicals, the Black Lives Matter Movement, and the Anti-racist Christianity of Phillis Wheatley and Quobna Ottobah Cugoano (Article Commentary)

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On September 17, 2020, President Donald Trump spoke at the National Archives Museum for the White House Conference on American History and quoted Martin Luther King Jr: “We embrace the vision of Martin Luther King, where children are not judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”¹ After misusing King to establish his point, Trump launched into his critique of “the left” and what he termed Critical Race Theory²: “By viewing every issue through the lens of race, [the left] want to impose a new segregation . . . Critical race theory, the 1619 Project, and the crusade against American history is toxic propaganda, ideological poison.”³ This evoking of King’s memory to denounce Critical Race Theory reimagines both American history and Black peoples’ experiences in two different ways. First, Trump defines recognition of racism in American history as racist itself, perversely branding the pursuit of inclusion and diversity as segregation. Secondly, Trump neutralizes King as a proponent of nonviolence and compliance, ignoring the fact that King was arrested and beaten while fighting for civil rights.⁴ Further, Trump positions Critical Race Theory as a threat to Christianity, asserting that it views “hard work, rational thinking, the nuclear family, and belief in God” as “aspects of ‘whiteness.’”⁵ In this statement, Trump frames the efforts of anti-racism as an attack against Christianity itself. Specifically, Trump uses King, a Black man, to uphold white supremacist ideologies while asserting that standing up for the rights of Black individuals is anti-Christian.

Trump’s critique of Critical Race Theory as anti-Christian affirms the security of his white, evangelical followers.⁶ Despite their support waning in 2020, 72 percent of white evangelicals continued

1. Donald Trump, “Remarks by President Trump at the White House Conference on American History,” *The White House*, 17 September 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-white-house-conference-american-history/>.

2. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 3rd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2017). Delgado and Stefancic define Critical Race Theory as “a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (3). Critical Race Theory requires that racism be recognized, and it is this recognition of racism throughout the history of the United States that Trump dislikes.

3. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump,” para. 19–20. For an explanation of the aims of the 1619 Project, see Jake Silverstein, “Why We Published The 1619 Project,” *The New York Times*, 20 December 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/20/magazine/1619-intro.html>. According to the *New York Times*, “the goal of The 1619 Project is to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation’s birth year. Doing so requires us to place the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country.”

4. Laura Visser-Maessen, “Getting to That Promised Land: Reclaiming Martin Luther King, Jr. and 21st Century Black Activism in the United States and Western Europe,” *European Journal of American Studies* 14, no. 1 (2019): 1–25.

5. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump,” para. 15.

6. Daniel Miller, “The Mystery of Evangelical Trump Support?” *Constellations* 26, no. 1 (2019): 43–58; Dante Scala, “Polls and Elections: The Skeptical Faithful: How Trump Gained Momentum Among Evangelicals,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2020): 927–47; Gerardo Martí, “The Unexpected Orthodoxy of Donald J. Trump: White Evangelical Support for the 45th President of the United States,” *Sociology of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2019): 1–8.

to support Trump while the majority of Black and Latinx Christians did not.⁷ During the 2020 election, white evangelicals created churches called “Patriot Churches,” praying for Trump’s reelection and claiming, “Black Lives Matter isn’t being powered by the Holy Spirit.”⁸ Indeed, Christianity and race have been intertwined for centuries, with white Christianity consistently opposing racial liberation.⁹ I use the term white Christianity¹⁰ to describe the historical racism that Christians have upheld in imagining Christ as white, ignoring and perpetuating racial injustice, and conflating faith in God with patriotism while refusing to criticize the racism in the United States.¹¹ Anthea Butler discusses evangelicals in her forthcoming book *White Evangelical Racism* and emphasizes that evangelicals are not simply religious but “a political group who have power and authority and influence and who follow after Republicanism.”¹² Thus, white Christianity has become deeply intertwined with politics as evangelicals often believe Republicans to be the Christian political candidates.¹³ Further, as evangelicals imagine Christ as white, this “renders bodies of color simultaneously visible and profane through metonymy, substituting the spiritual purity of a white Christ with a racialized idealized in whiteness.”¹⁴ To combat white Christianity of the eighteenth century, Phillis Wheatley’s (1753–1784) and Quobna Ottobah Cugoano’s (1757–1791) texts act as counternarratives that mount resistance to the oppression of their enslavers in their own, new forms of anti-racist Christianity. In her poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773), Wheatley writes “*Christians, Negros, black as Cain, / May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train.*”¹⁵ Through her alignment of “Christians” and “Negros,” Wheatley not only establishes her right to the “angelic train” of Christian redemption but destabilizes the Black/white binary that wrongly identifies Christianity as belonging to whiteness. Joel Pace asserts that Wheatley enacts “Imag-I-nation,” a term he defines as involving “the ways identity is modified and maintained across the Atlantic by preserving as well as modifying cultural practices and yoking opposites.”¹⁶ While Wheatley and Cugoano

7. Michael Lipka and Gregory A. Smith, “White Evangelical Approval of Trump Slips, but Eight-in-Ten Say They Would Vote for Him,” *Pew Research Center*, 1 July 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/01/white-evangelical-approval-of-trump-slips-but-eight-in-ten-say-they-would-vote-for-him/>.

8. Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Seeking Power in Jesus’ Name: Trump Sparks a Rise of Patriot Churches,” *The Washington Post*, October 26, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/10/26/trump-christian-nationalism-patriot-church/>.

9. Michael G. Lacy, “Exposing the Spectrum of Whiteness: Rhetorical Conceptions of White Absolutism,” *Annals of the International Communication Association* 32, no. 1, (2008): 277–311, 281.

10. I chose not to capitalize the word “white” because, as the *Columbia Journalism Review* asserts, “For many people, *Black* reflects a shared sense of identity and community. White carries a different set of meanings; capitalizing the word in this context risks following the lead of white supremacists.” See Mike Laws, “Why We Capitalize ‘Black’ (and not ‘white’),” *Columbia Journalism Review*, 16 June 2020, <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.php>.

11. In using the term white Christianity, I am aware there are progressive Christians of different races and ethnic backgrounds (including white individuals) who fight for racial justice and stand up for LGBTQ+ rights. These individuals do not fit within the term “white Christianity” as defined above but move into the realm of anti-racist Christianity.

12. *Act.tv*, “White Evangelical Racism. Anthea Butler Joins,” November 19, 2020, YouTube video, 00:56, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMZpsrYGLeA>.

13. Daniel Miller, “The Mystery of Evangelical Trump Support?” *Constellations* 26, no. 1 (2019): 43–58; Dante Scala, “Polls and Elections: The Skeptical Faithful: How Trump Gained Momentum Among Evangelicals,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2020): 927–47, 929.

14. Gloria Nziba Pindi and Antonio Tomas De La Garza, “The Colonial Jesus: Deconstructing White Christianity,” in *Interrogating the Communicative Power of Whiteness*, ed. Dawn Marie D. McIntosh, Dreama G. Moon, and Thomas K. Nakayama (New York: Routledge, 2019), 218–238, 218.

15. Phillis Wheatley, “On Being Brought From Africa to America,” in *Complete Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Classics, 2001), 13.

16. Joel Pace, “Journeys of the Imagination in Wheatley and Coleridge,” in *Transatlantic Literary Studies, 1660–1830*, ed. Eve Tavor Bannet and Susan Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 238–253, 239.

destabilize the Black/white binary by “yoking” their own cultural identities with that of Christianity, I assert they also use that very binary to reject white Christianity and instead form an anti-racist Christianity in which blackness can no longer be equated with sin.

Wheatley and Cugoano rightly attack white Christianity’s designation of Blackness as sinful as this designation is exactly the relationship the present-day evangelicals continue to assert. A Christian opinion piece by Richard Land directs evangelicals to “reject” Black Lives Matter (BLM) because the movement is “antibiblical” because of its support of LGBTQ+.¹⁷ Land also insists that racism is an inevitable evil that “plagues every nation because this disgusting form of sinful human pride is common to the fallen human condition.”¹⁸ By conflating racism with pride, Land minimizes racism as a sin. Simultaneously, Land vehemently condemns the LGBTQ+ community, thus positioning some sins as inevitable and others as condemnable. Another evangelical, Mike Mazzalango, called George Floyd “a petty criminal who was killed while in police custody.”¹⁹ Both evangelicals condemn what they interpret to be sins of sexuality and perceived criminal activity but do not denounce racism for its inevitability. Despite Trump’s many sins, including sexual immorality and criminality,²⁰ “televangelist Jim Bakker urged his followers to oppose impeachment because God ‘anointed your president.’”²¹ Evangelicals like Mazzalango forgive Trump’s sins but do not offer the same grace to Floyd because he might have been a “criminal.”²² Cugoano and Wheatley countered this strand of white Christianity by advocating for resistance and rejecting hypocrisy that offers redemption and liberty to white people but not Black people.

Wheatley draws from her Biblical teachings to show her enslavers that Christianity does not only belong to them and that Black people should not be equated with sin:

’T’WAS mercy brought me from my *pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there’s a *Saviour* too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
‘Their color is a diabolic die.’
Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train.²³

Wheatley crosses the Black/white binary that imagines Christianity as belonging to whiteness by tying “*pagan* land” to “God” and “*Savior*” and “*Christians*” to “*Negros*.” She performs what Pace calls “Imag-I-nation”²⁴ wherein she draws together her own cultural history with that of Christianity, blurring the lines between what is white and what is Black. Wheatley further crosses the binary by embodying her oppressors’ voices, “Their color is a diabolic die,” undermining their judgement by asserting her skin color will not prevent her redemption. Further, she destabilizes the concept of Black skin as sinful when

17. Richard Land, “A Southern Baptist Leader’s Response to the Black Lives Matter Movement: Opinion,” *Tennessean*, last modified August 20, 2020, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/2020/08/20/southern-baptist-leader-richard-land-response-black-lives-matter-movement/5616017002/>, para. 8.

18. Land, “A Southern Baptist,” para. 8.

19. Bobby Ross Jr., “Why the ‘Black Lives Matter’ Movement is so Controversial to Many Christians,” last modified July 8, 2020, <https://christianchronicle.org/why-the-black-lives-matter-movement-is-so-controversial-to-many-christians/>.

20. Jacques Berlinerblau, “Donald J. Trump, the White Evangelicals, and Martin Luther: A Hypothesis,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 73, no. 1, (2018): 18–30, 19.

21. Sarah Posner, “No the Latest Scandal Won’t Make White Evangelicals Ditch Trump. Whatever It Is,” *Washington Post*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/10/01/white-evangelicals-stay-trump/>.

22. Ross, “Why the ‘Black Lives Matter’ Movement.”

23. Wheatley, “On Being Brought,” 13.

24. Pace, “Journeys of the Imagination,” 239.

she writes “black as *Cain*,” referring to the biblical Cain who murdered his brother. Throughout history, religious leaders believed Black people came from “Cain, Canaan, Ham, and other ignoble biblical characters whom God ‘marked’ owing to transgression and sin.”²⁵ Thus, when Wheatley describes the sin of murder as black, she distinguishes Cain’s sin from the color of her skin, emphasizing that Blackness does not equal sin. Thus, Wheatley not only crosses the border but effectively claims Christianity for her own by drawing it to her side of the Black/white binary, constructing an anti-racist Christianity. In 2020, Black Christian minister Brenda Salter McNeil continues to embrace this anti-racist Christianity: “If you still support policies that cage up children, or that cause people of color to die of covid-19, that’s not reconciliation . . . It’s a smokescreen for racism.”²⁶ Black historian and writer Jemar Tisby notes, “What Black Lives Matter did was highlight the racism and white supremacy that still has a stranglehold on much of white Christianity.”²⁷ Like Wheatley, Black Christians uphold anti-racist Christianity, calling out white supremacy for its sins.

Cugoano also established anti-racist Christianity through Biblical language against his white oppressors, calling specifically for physical resistance in his text *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1791). In *Thoughts and Sentiments*, Cugoano tells Christians to abolish slavery because it is sinful according to the Bible: “*all men should love their neighbours as themselves and that they should do unto others, as they would that men should do to them.*”²⁸ He thus constructs his counternarrative by “yoking opposites,”²⁹ drawing white Christian logic into an anti-racist plea for freedom. Cugoano does not simply plead for the abolishment of slavery but encourages a resistance: “Wherefore it is as much the duty of a man who is robbed in that manner to get out of the hands of his enslaver, as it is for an honest community of men to get out of the hands of rogues and villains.”³⁰ Regardless of slavery being law, Cugoano asserts slavery is not lawful according to the Bible; it is a sin, and therefore Black people should resist this law. Today, Christians argue over the lawfulness of the BLM protests occurring because of police brutality. Writer and founder of the Black feminist community “For Harriet,” Kimberly Foster has shared her views on protests and riots: “We don’t have to be respectable in this fight. People are dying . . . We are past trying to neatly package our rage.”³¹ Foster’s views on property damage reflect Cugoano’s call for resistance—if the law is unjust, the people must “get out of the hands of rogues and villains.”³²

The transatlantic archive depicts this physical resistance of enslaved people against the upholders of the law. Stephanie Smallwood writes of the way the Middle Passage turned enslaved people into commodities, detailing the enslaved people’s experiences on ships and in underground prisons.³³ Despite this “human commodification,” enslaved people revolted against their captors: “Though the captives managed to kill the ship’s doctor, boatswain, and two other crewmen, a hundred slaves also were killed in the fighting that ensued and the surviving rebels were eventually subdued.”³⁴ Even with the passive voice in the line “the surviving rebels were eventually subdued,” the slave traders are the active force in this sentence, killing and beating the enslaved. This description of the enslaved people’s rebellion and their consequent punishment parallels contemporary experiences between police and Black people. Mariame

25. Lacy, “Exposing the Spectrum,” 281.

26. Eliza Griswold, “How Black Lives Matter is Changing the Church,” *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/on-religion/how-black-lives-matter-is-changing-the-church>, para. 9.

27. Griswold, “How Black Lives Matter,” para. 6.

28. Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evils of Slavery*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Classics, 1999), 11.

29. Pace, “Journeys of the Imagination,” 239.

30. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 59.

31. Kimberly Foster, “Looting Should be the Least of Your Concerns,” *For Harriet*, June 2, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GPdkXV2t2Y>.

32. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 59.

33. Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

34. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 34, 43.

Kaba describes how police continue to “keep black and other marginalized people in check through threats of arrest, incarceration, violence and death.”³⁵ Police use violence against BLM protestors even though these protests are overwhelmingly peaceful.³⁶ Trump’s declaration “when the looting starts, the shooting starts”³⁷ and the outcry of Christians condemning rioting suggest that certain evangelicals value property more than the lives of Black people and prefer to condemn some sins—rioting, looting—more than they condemn the sin of murder. Instead of trying to understand the BLM cry for help and condemning the police who kill Black people, Trump labels protestors “THUGS,”³⁸ a highly racialized word,³⁹ heightening white evangelical fear of Black bodies and condemning Black resistance as a sin.

The labeling of Black resistance as sinful only further marks evangelicals’ attempt to exclude people of color from Christianity and mark them as dangerous. Christina Sharpe reminds us that a young Black boy is not just a boy but is labeled “thug.”⁴⁰ Pointing to the example of Michael Brown’s murder at the hand of Darren Wilson, Sharpe details how Wilson likens Brown to “Hulk Hogan,” describing him as “grunting” like an animal.⁴¹ This rhetoric removes all accountability from the shoulders of the cop responsible for killing Brown and simultaneously paints Brown as a monster, refusing to recognize him as a child. Cugoano also argued for the humanity of Black people: “Every man of any sensibility, whether he be a Christian or an heathen . . . must think, that for any man . . . to deal with their fellow-creatures as with the beasts of the field; or to account them as such . . . those men . . . are the greatest villains in the world.”⁴² Cugoano establishes that white people have likened Black people to “beasts” and that Christians who think of Black people as animals are “the greatest villains in the world.” Therefore, while Christians condemn the sins of BLM and ignore murders by police, Cugoano makes it clear that the worst sin, the worst villains in the world, are the racists.

While Donald Trump used Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. to make his point that anti-racism and Critical Race Theory are indeed anti-Christian and anti-American, King argued in the mode of the anti-racist Christianity of Wheatley and Cugoano. King states, “as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, when will you be satisfied? We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality.”⁴³ King marched against the law, the very law that Trump and many evangelicals uphold, to fight against the sin of racism. Thus, while anti-racist Christianity offers redemption for all, Wheatley’s “angelic train” makes a distinction: Those who “join th’ angelic train” are “refin’d.”⁴⁴ To be refined means one must ask for forgiveness, must be cleansed of their sins. However, if

35. Mariame Kaba, “Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police,” *New York Times*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/opinion/sunday/floyd-abolish-defund-police.html>, para. 8.

36. Sanya Mansoor, “93% of Black Lives Matter Protests Have Been Peaceful, New Report Finds,” *Time*, September 5, 2020, <https://time.com/5886348/report-peaceful-protests/?fbclid=IwAR1s5AyO8tsb1R3F9oPrUX7rmlwulffhEkrkL3ZH0QzL4D5BlaCoour2YqU>.

37. Donald Trump, “These THUGS are dishonoring,” *Twitter*, May 28, 2020, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1266231100780744704>. Due to Twitter suspending Donald Trump's account, the tweet was removed. Responses and comments to the tweet can still be seen at this link.

38. Trump, “These THUGS,” *Twitter*.

39. Fakunle Smiley, “From ‘brute’ to ‘thug’: The Demonization and Criminalization of Unarmed Black Male Victims in America,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 26, no. 3–4, (2016): 350–66. Trump’s use of the term “thug” is highly racialized. Smiley asserts that the word “has become a way to describe Black males who reject or do not rise to the standard of White America” and has developed from the stereotype of Black men as “brutes.”

40. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 12.

41. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 82.

42. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 25.

43. Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” August 28, 1963, available at *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>.

44. Wheatley, “On Being Brought,” 13.

Christians refuse to condemn racism and murder, they align themselves with “the greatest villains in the world.”⁴⁵ Wheatley’s “angelic train” may be just out of reach for white Christianity.

45. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 25.